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80-729

No. .

In the
Supreme Court of the United States.

OCTOBER TERM, 1980.

ALVIN J. OWEN, SR., ADMINISTRATOR,
PETITIONER,

v.

ROBERT W. MESERVE ET AL.,
TRUSTEES OF THE PROPERTY OF THE BOSTON
AND MAINE RAILROAD CORPORATION,
RESPONDENTS.

Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

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BATEMAN & SLADE, INC. BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Question Presented.

Whether that portion of the Massachusetts Wrongful Death Statute which denies recovery for wrongful death caused by the negligent action of a railroad, where Massachusetts law permits recovery for personal injuries, violates the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution?

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RESPONDENTS.

Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

The petitioner, Alvin J. Owen, Sr., Administrator of the Estate of Alvin J. Owen, Jr., petitions for a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in this case.

Opinion Below.

The opinion of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court is reported at Mass. Adv. Sh. (1980) 1825, 408 N.E. 2d 867 (1980), and is reproduced in the appendix attached hereto.

Jurisdiction.

The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. § 1257.

Statutes and Constitutional Provisions.

UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION, FOURTEENTH AMENDMENT, § 1.

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL LAWS C. 229, § 2.

> *Wrongful death; liability for damages*: A person who (1) by his negligence causes the death of a person in the

exercise of due care, or (2) by wilful, wanton or reckless act causes the death of a person under such circumstances that the deceased could have recovered damages for personal injuries if his death had not resulted, or (3) operates a common carrier of passengers and by his negligence causes the death of a passenger, or (4) operates a common carrier of passengers and by his wilful, wanton or reckless act causes the death of a passenger under such circumstances that the deceased could have recovered damages for personal injuries if his death had not resulted, shall be liable in damages in the sum of not less than five thousand nor more than fifty thousand dollars, to be assessed with reference to the degree of his culpability and distributed as provided in section one; except that (1) the liability of an employer to a person in his employment shall not be governed by this section, (2) a person operating a railroad shall not be liable for negligence in causing the death of a person while walking or being upon such railroad contrary to law or to the reasonable rules and regulations of the carrier, and (3) a person operating a street railway or electric railroad shall not be liable for negligence for causing the death of a person while walking or being upon that part of the street railway or electric railroad not within the limits of a highway. A person shall be liable for the negligence or the wilful, wanton or reckless act of his agents or servants while engaged in his business to the same extent and subject to the same limits as he would be liable under this section for his own act, except that the damages shall be assessed with reference to the degree of culpability of his agents or servants. Damages under this section shall be recovered in an action of tort by the executor or administrator of the deceased. No recovery shall be had under this section for a death which does not occur within two years after the injury which caused the

death. An action to recover damages under this section shall be commenced within two years from the date of death or within such time thereafter as is provided by section four, four B, nine or ten of chapter two hundred and sixty.

Statement of the Case.

This case came to be heard in the Superior Court in November, 1978, and during the course of trial the plaintiff seasonably raised the federal question involved in this petition. At the close of trial, the court directed a verdict for the defendant, and the plaintiff seasonably filed an appeal to the Massachusetts Appeals Court and on February 15, 1980 this case was then transferred *sua sponte* to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. On August 5, 1980, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court affirmed the judgment of the trial court.

Statement of Facts.

On June 1, 1971 at approximately 5:15 P.M. Alvin J. Owens, Jr., and a friend were crossing railroad tracks in the City of Malden owned by the defendant, Boston and Maine Corporation. The tracks consisting of two, an eastbound and westbound track on which budliner passenger trains travel from North Station, Boston to Reading and return. The area adjacent to the track where the accident occurred consisted of *residential homes, a fire station,* and the high school football stadium. There was also evidence children were frequently

seen by the defendants crossing the tracks in this area and watched football games while sitting on the trackbed. During football games the engineers were notified to operate at reduced speed limits.

The boys were standing in the eastbound track as an eastbound train consisting of four cars approached. This train was traveling at approximately 60-65 miles per hour. As the train proceeded towards the pedestrians, it sounded a horn but did not slow down. The engineer observed the boys on the track when he was 1,500 feet from them. These boys were facing the eastbound track and while standing on that track did not know a westbound four car train was also approaching at a speed of approximately 70 miles per hour from behind. Four of these diesel operated self propelled passenger cars weighed approximately 464,000 pounds. The operator of the eastbound train made a hand gesture to the boys that a train was approaching from the rear, however, they did not indicate this warning was understood. As the eastbound train passed by without slowing down, they crossed onto the westbound track.

The fireman who was operating the westbound train noticed the boys in the adjacent track, a distance of some 400 feet from them facing away from him. The fireman upon seeing the boys failed to apply any brakes or take any other evasive action until the boys crossed onto the westbound track. He applied the brakes and emergency brakes although aware of the other train. Just before impact the boys attempted to turn around but were struck by the westbound train traveling at a speed of approximately 65 miles per hour, killing both boys. The operator of the westbound train who had the title of "Fireman" had at the time of this accident been ordered by the defendant, Boston and Maine Corporation to be restricted to yard service in respect to operating these trains. Neither boy was aware of the westbound train until the moment of impact.

The westbound train traveled approximately 300 feet with its brakes applied to the point of impact and 2,000 feet until it came to a stop on the tracks. Human remains were found from the point of the impact to where the train came to a stop. At the point of the accident there was evidence of pedestrian paths, and there was no fence adjacent to the railroad tracks in the area of the accident for a distance of 400 feet or more.

Reasons Why the Writ Should Be Granted.

Under Massachusetts tort law, an owner or occupier of land must exercise reasonable care to 1) all persons lawfully on their land; 2) perceived trespassers in a position of danger who do not understand or appreciate their peril; 3) perceived helplessly trapped trespassers; and 4) foreseeable child trespassers. *Mounsey* v. *Ellard*, 363 Mass. 693, 297 N.E. 2d 43 (1973); *Pridgen* v. *Boston Housing Authority*, 364 Mass. 696, 308 N.E. 2d 467 (1974); *Kalinowski* v. *Smith*, Mass. App. Ct. Adv. Sh. (1978) 1261, 383 N.E. 2d 550 (1978); *Soule* v. *Massachusetts Electric Company*, Mass. Adv. Sh. (1979) 1380, 390 N.E. 2d 716 (1979). See Restatement (Second) of Torts § 336 (1965). In the present case, the train operators were under a duty to exercise ordinary care to avoid injuring the boys the moment they perceived the boys in an obvious position of danger which the boys were unaware of.[1] If the plaintiff's intestate had been injured, he would have had a cause of action founded upon the negligence of the railroad.[2]

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[1] In Massachusetts "the railroad is under a duty to sound a warning or slacken the speed of its train where a pedestrian manifests an intention to cross the tracks." *Kalinowski* v. *Smith*, Mass. App. Ct. Adv. Sh. (1978) 1261 at 1264, 383 N.E. 2d 550, 552 (1978); see *McNally* v. *Trustees, N.Y. N.H. & H. R.R.*, 325 Mass. 367, 370, 90 N.E. 2d 318 (1950).

[2] "We assume, without deciding, that in a case similar to the present one a child who was injured but not killed could recover damages on the basis of

However, the Massachusetts Wrongful Death Statute, Mass. G.L. c. 229, § 2, creates a duty upon the railroads only to refrain from wilful, wanton and reckless conduct with respect to any trespassers who are killed, hence, the foundation of liability for death is a lesser duty owed than that upon which liability for personal injury is based. This statutory limitation on the railroad's liability results in the railroad owing a duty of due care to those in the boys' situation who are injured but not to those who are killed. This anomaly results in predicating the right to recover for identical breaches in duty upon whether death or mere injury ensue and is clearly unconstitutional.[3]

In this case, the Massachusetts Wrongful Death Statute arbitrarily and unjustifiably deprives the plaintiff of a right of recovery for negligently inflicted death caused by a railroad, where the same negligent act would create a right of recovery if injury resulted. This unequal treatment denying *any* recovery for death, has created an irrational and impermissible classification whose special or defining legislative characteristic is the extent of the harm. These facts must be examined by middle tier review as the right to life is fundamental. This legislative classification does not bear a "significant" or "substantial" relationship to a state purpose. *Reed* v. *Reed*, 404 U.S. 71 (1971); *Weber* v. *Aetna Casualty & Surety Co.*, 406

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the negligence of the railroad without showing willful, wanton or reckless conduct." *Owen* v. *Meserve*. (See App. at p. 3a.)

[3]The plaintiff does not question the constitutionality of the Massachusetts Wrongful Death Statute in 1971, but rather he contends that a portion of that statute has now become unconstitutional due to changes in Massachusetts general tort law.

> It is nothing new in constitutional law that a statute valid at one time may become void at another time because of altered circumstances. *Vigeant* v. *Postal Telegraph Cable Co.*, 260 Mass. 335, 341, 157 N.E. 651, 655 (1927).

U.S. 164 (1972); *Craig* v. *Boren*, 429 U.S. 190 (1976). Under this standard of equal protection, this Court should determine whether the actual or "articulated" legislative purpose is *in fact* furthered by the legislative classification. *San Antonio School District* v. *Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 1 (1973); *Eisenstadt* v. *Baird*, 405 U.S. 438 (1972); Gunther, Forward: *In Search of Evolving Doctrine on a Changing Court: A Model for a Newer Equal Protection*, 86 Harv. L. Rev. 1 (1972). The plaintiff argues that there is no relationship *in fact* as the railroad is already under a duty to refrain from negligence in personal injury actions.

Furthermore, there is no "rational" relationship between the statutory limitation on the railroad's liability and the purpose of the statute. This Court has refused to uphold this unjust and illogical principle:

> Where existing law imposes a primary duty, violations of which are compensable if they cause injury, nothing in ordinary notions of justice suggests that a violation should be nonactionable simply because it was serious enough to cause death. On the contrary, that rule has been criticized ever since its inception, and described in such terms as "barbarous." *Moragne* v. *States Marine Lines*, 398 U.S. 375, 381 (1970).[4]

This statutory discrimination permits the tortfeasor to profit by relief from liability after committing the most serious harm.[5]

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[4] After reviewing the history of wrongful death, this Court remarked on the gross inequity and injustice which arose in maritime law where "within territorial waters, identical conduct violating federal law (here the furnishing of an unseaworthy vessel) produces liability if the victim is merely injured, but frequently not if he is killed." *Moragne*, *supra* at 395.

[5] "Practically, it would mean that the graver the harm the better the chance of immunity. Moreover, it allows the act of the tortfeasor to fore-

There is no rational relationship between the governmental objective of having an effective transportation system and the extent of harm caused by the negligent or wrongful act. Railroads predicate the manner in which they operate trains on the primary duty imposed by the general negligence rule and not on the fact that they may escape liability for a negligent act if they kill the victim. *Moragne, supra.*[8] Nor do victims guide their conduct by the legal consequences of the extent of harm.

The Massachusetts courts have established a standard to protect people from great risk of harm. It would be reprehensible to hold that a person's personal physical safety is less worthy of protection or a claimant less worthy of compensation because of death, and yet, that is the present state of Massachusetts law in this situation. It is plainly unconstitutional to make such an arbitrary and unreasonable distinction based upon the nature of harm in the assigning of basic rights and duties and it becomes even more intolerable when such inequality does not result in any compensating advantage or benefit.

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close his own liability — the life of the action would be in his hands. These results have a sound cogency, quite aside from the general reasons justifying the death statutes, for the argument that those deprived of their own by death should not also be deprived of all recompense by the death." *Todd* v. *Sandidge Construction Co., any,* 341 F.2d 75, 77 (1964).
The courts have long recognized . . .

> a glaring absurdity in allowing a husband and father, if injured, but not killed, a right of action for the recovery of the damages thus sustained, and denying to his widow and children any compensation for the damages inflicted upon them, should the injury be greater and result in his death.

Rowe v. *Richards,* 35 S.D. 201, 204 (1915), quoting *Maney* v. *C., B. & Q. R. R. Co.,* 49 Ill. App. 105.

[8] "It can hardly be said that shipowners have molded their conduct around the possibility that in a few special circumstances they may escape liability for such a breach." *Moragne, supra* at 404.

Conclusion.

The particular provision of the Massachusetts Wrongful Death Statute relating to railroads, violates § 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment, by creating unequal treatment based upon an irrational distinction not reasonably related to any public purpose.

Respectfully submitted,

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ALVIN J. OWEN, SR., administrator, *vs.* ROBERT W. MESERVE & another, trustees.

Middlesex. April 9, 1980. — August 5, 1980.

Present: HENNESSEY, C.J., QUIRICO, BRAUCHER, WILKINS, & ABRAMS, JJ.

Negligence, Railroad, Trespasser. *Constitutional Law*, Equal protection of laws.

TORT. Writ in the Superior Court dated May 25, 1972.

The case was tried before *Mitchell*, J.

After review was sought in the Appeals Court, the Supreme Judicial Court, on its own initiative, ordered direct appellate review.

Donald P. Garrity (*James A. McDonald, Jr.*, with him) for the plaintiff.

Francis J. Bousquet & Frank A. Smith, III, for the defendants.

BRAUCHER, J. On June 1, 1971, the plaintiff's intestate, a fifteen-year-old boy, was struck and killed by a passenger train of the defendants, trustees of the Boston & Maine Corporation (railroad). A verdict has been directed for the defendant in the plaintiff's action for wrongful death by virtue of a provision in G. L. c. 229, § 2, as amended through St. 1967, c. 666, § 1: "a person operating a railroad shall not be liable for negligence in causing the death of a person while walking or being upon such railroad contrary to law or to the reasonable rules and regulations of the carrier." The plaintiff contends that he has a common law claim not subject to the statute and, alternatively, that the statute denies equal protection of the laws in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. We reject these contentions and uphold the judgment.

The plaintiff's complaint contains four counts, one for conscious pain and suffering as a result of the defendants' negligence, one for wrongful death as a result of the defendants' negligence, one for conscious pain and suffering as a result of the defendants' willful, wanton and reckless conduct, and one for wrongful death as a result of the defendants' willful, wanton and reckless conduct. The case was tried before a jury and at the close of all the evidence the judge allowed the defendants' motion for a directed verdict. The plaintiff appealed from the resulting judgment, and we transferred the case from the Appeals Court on our own motion.

There was evidence of the following facts. About 5:15 P.M. the boy and a friend climbed the abutment of a railroad overpass in Malden and stepped onto the roadbed of the railroad. The engineer and the fireman of a train bound for Boston, travelling seventy miles an hour, saw them about 400 feet ahead, in the path of an oncoming train bound for Reading. The Reading-bound train blew its air horn and the boys moved into the path of the Boston-bound train. The engineer and the fireman of the Reading-bound train tried to warn the boys by pointing down the track, but the boys responded with obscene gestures. The fireman of the Boston-bound train sounded his horn and applied the brakes, but the train hit the boys at a speed of sixty to sixty-five miles an hour and continued about 2000 feet before coming to a stop.

The plaintiff does not now contend that there was evidence of the boy's conscious pain and suffering or of the defendants' willful, wanton or reckless conduct. Nor does he contend that the boy was lawfully on the railroad track. He argues that the railroad owed him a common law duty of reasonable care, not subject to the statutory limitation on wrongful death actions, citing *Pridgen* v. *Boston Hous. Auth.*, 364 Mass. 696, 713 (1974) ("helplessly trapped" trespasser); and *Soule* v. *Massachusetts Elec. Co.*, Mass. , (1979)[a] ("foreseeable child trespassers"). Alterna-

[a] Mass. Adv. Sh. (1979) 1380, 1385.

tively, he argues that the statutory distinction between trespassers who are injured and trespassers who are killed is irrational and impermissible as a denial of equal protection.

In *Gaudette* v. *Webb*, 362 Mass. 60, 71 (1972), we held that "the right to recovery for wrongful death is of common law origin," and that statutes limiting the period for bringing actions for death may be tolled pursuant to G. L. c. 260. But we clearly stated that other provisions of G. L. c. 229, § 2, imposed limitations on such recovery. In *Minkley* v. *MacFarland*, 371 Mass. 891 (1976), we rejected claims for common law recovery in addition to a statutory claim for wrongful death. See *Meagher* v. *Electrolux Corp.*, 388 F. Supp. 1009, 1011 (D. Mass. 1975). Recovery for wrongful death remained subject to the statutory provisions, including the denial of recovery for wrongful death of a trespasser caused by the negligence of a railroad. *Corrado* v. *New York, N.H. & H. R.R.*, 333 Mass. 417, 419-420 (1956). We consider no question as to the effect of St. 1973, c. 699, § 1, effective January 1, 1974, and subsequent amendments to G. L. c. 229, § 2.

A limitation on the recovery of damages for wrongful death does not impinge on a constitutionally protected substantive right and is not predicated on a constitutionally suspect classification. Hence the validity of the classification must be sustained against the plaintiff's equal protection claim unless the classification rests on grounds wholly irrelevant to the achievement of any legitimate governmental objective. *Harris* v. *McRae*, U.S. , (1980).[b] See *Paro* v. *Longwood Hosp.*, 373 Mass. 645, 648-651 (1977).

We assume, without deciding, that in a case similar to the present one a child who was injured but not killed could recover damages on the basis of the negligence of the railroad without showing willful, wanton or reckless conduct. Cf. *Kalinowski* v. *Smith*, Mass. App. Ct. ,

[b] 48 U.S.L.W. 4941, 4948 (June 30, 1980).

(1978)[c] (child of four years and eight months). "Under the traditional common law analysis," however, willful and wanton misconduct would be required. *Soule* v. *Massachusetts Elec. Co.*, Mass. , (1979).[d] We recognize that changing conditions may render a statute unequal in its operation and invalid even though it was valid when enacted. *Vigeant* v. *Postal Tel. Cable Co.*, 260 Mass. 335, 342 (1927). But we do not think our decision in the *Soule* case, adopting a more modern view of common law liability to child trespassers, rendered invalid a contrary statutory rule that retained some rational force.

The law governing recovery for wrongful death has been largely statutory in the United States, and has varied from State to State. See 1 S.M. Speiser, Recovery for Wrongful Death § 1:9 (2d ed. 1975). The governing statute in Massachusetts in 1971 defined the beneficiaries of such recovery, fixed maximum and minimum dollar amounts, and provided for assessment of damages with reference to the degree of the defendant's culpability. Thus the principles governing recovery for death were different in many important respects from those governing personal injury. We seem never to have passed on the constitutionality of such differences, but equal protection challenges to similar differences have been rejected in other States. *Butler* v. *Chicago Transit Auth.*, 38 Ill. 2d 361, 365 (1967) (maximum recovery). *Glick* v. *Ballentine Produce Inc.*, 396 S.W.2d 609, 615 (Mo. 1965), appeal dismissed, 385 U.S. 5 (1966) (same). *Gibbs* v. *Prior*, 107 N.H. 218, 220 (1966) (same). *Cogger* v. *Trudell*, 35 Wis. 2d 350, 360 (1967) (denial of recovery by children when spouse survives). Cf. *Pinnick* v. *Cleary*, 360 Mass. 1, 27-31 (1971) (limitation of damages for pain and suffering in automobile cases). So far as *In re Paris Air Crash of March 3, 1974*, 427 F. Supp. 701, 708 (C.D. Cal. 1977), indicates that damage rules for wrongful death cases must harmonize with the rules for per-

[c] Mass. App. Ct. Adv. Sh. (1978) 1261, 1265.

[d] Mass. Adv. Sh. (1979) 1380, 1383.

sonal injury and property damage cases, we do not follow that decision.

The exception negating railroad liability for negligence resulting in the death of a trespasser first appeared in St. 1853, c. 414, § 2, and it was carried into G. L. c. 229, § 3 (1932). At that time no liability was imposed for death resulting from willful, wanton or reckless conduct of a railroad. *Foynes* v. *New York Cent. R.R.*, 276 Mass. 89, 92 (1931). Thus the railroad's only liability was based on negligence, and the exception apparently negated any liability of a railroad for the death of a trespasser on its right-of-way. Liability for willful, wanton or reckless conduct was added by St. 1941, c. 460, § 2, but the exception remained coextensive with the liability. The exception disappeared in the revisions by St. 1946, c. 614, and St. 1947, c. 506, which changed recovery from a "punitive" to a "compensatory" basis, but it was restored by St. 1949, c. 427, § 3, inserting G. L. c. 229, § 2A. See *Gaudette* v. *Webb*, 362 Mass. 60, 66-67 n.4 (1972). By St. 1958, c. 238, § 1, amending G. L. c. 229, § 2, the exception was limited to the liability of a railroad "for negligence," and so it remained at the time of the death now in issue. At that time, therefore, a railroad apparently might have become liable for the death of a trespasser resulting from its willful, wanton or reckless conduct.

This history suggests that the Legislature, in fixing the rules for recovery against a railroad for the death of a trespasser, balanced the goal of an effective transportation system against the danger of death to trespassers, taking into account the degree of culpability of the railroad and the opportunity of the trespasser to avoid the hazard. The balance was struck differently at different times; sometimes it coincided with the balance struck by our common law decisions on comparable cases of personal injury, sometimes it did not. But we are not prepared to say that the balance provided by the Legislature in 1971 was wholly irrelevant to the achievement of any legitimate governmental objective.

Judgment affirmed.